

# **Scoping/Notice of Opportunity to Comment**

## **For Grand Valley Ranger District US Forest Service Delta and Mesa Counties**

### **Spruce Beetle and Sudden Aspen Decline Treatments**

**October 2010**



Spruce Beetle Outbreak, Rio Grande NF



Sudden Aspen Decline, Grand Mesa NF

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Comments are being solicited on the proposed **Spruce Beetle and Sudden Aspen Decline Treatments (SAD) Environmental Analysis** on the Grand Valley Ranger District, Grand Mesa and Uncompahgre National Forests.

This document and attached maps provide detailed information about the purpose and need, proposed action, and the decision framework. This scoping document, describing the proposed project and the opportunity to comment during a specified period are required by 36 CFR 215.3. Legal notice of this opportunity to comment will be published in the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel. Comments concerning this proposal must be received by the Forest Service 30 days from the publication date of the legal notice.

## **PURPOSE AND NEED**

The Grand Valley Ranger District is proposing to implement treatments on the Grand Mesa and the Uncompahgre National Forests to address the Spruce beetle outbreak and Sudden Aspen Decline. This analysis is in response to:

- 1) Substantial increases in areas affected by the spruce beetle;
- 2) Heightened risk of substantial wide spread losses of standing mature Engelmann spruce;
- 3) Increasing numbers of incidents involving wind-thrown timber; and
- 4) Sudden Aspen Decline (SAD) affecting extensive areas of aspen.

The main objective of these treatments is to address the catastrophic effects of the spruce beetle outbreak and sudden aspen decline, thereby improving forest health. The purpose of and need for this action is to:

- 1) Reduce, mitigate and manage Spruce beetle populations; salvage trees that have been killed or attacked by insects; remove wind-thrown trees contributing to increased spruce beetle populations; regenerate deteriorating aspen stands where feasible and appropriate; reduce fuel loading in critical areas (wildland-urban interface, campgrounds, etc); retain vigor of forest stands; reduce the risk of hazard trees in campgrounds, adjacent to roadways and under power lines.
- 2) Address maintenance needs of facilities, developed recreation sites and special use permits such as campgrounds, summer homes, trailheads, ski areas and road right-of-ways.
- 3) Contribute to utilization of wood/biomass product needs of local facilities to meet local and economic sustainability objectives in the Forest Plan. (Page III-3, GMUG Forest Plan, 1991) ([www.fs.fed.us/woodybiomass/index.shtml/index.shtml](http://www.fs.fed.us/woodybiomass/index.shtml/index.shtml)).

Specific treatments will only occur where consistent with the Forest Plan Direction and other governing direction.

### **Spruce Beetle outbreak on Grand Mesa National Forest**

Treatment of spruce beetle infested stands through commercial timber sales or by non-commercial (salvage and sanitation) means is needed to help reduce the exponential increase of the spruce beetle population. The proposed action is essential to protect high value areas and slow the spread in mature spruce stands on the Grand Mesa. The proposed action would allow the Forest Service to react quickly to infested areas and wind-throw before heavy mortality occurs in surrounding stands.

Recent aerial surveys show that beetle populations are impacting many areas of the Grand Mesa (Maps 1 and 2), however these surveys typically only detect areas of dead or partially defoliated timber. Ground and aerial surveys conducted during the summers of 2009 and 2010 indicate that the infestation is more prevalent and widespread.

### **Sudden Aspen Decline (SAD)**

The health condition of numerous aspen stands is degrading rapidly due to Sudden Aspen Decline ([www.fs.fed.us/r2/fhm/](http://www.fs.fed.us/r2/fhm/)). Prompt harvesting is needed to promote regeneration of aspen. Recent aerial surveys have been developed depicting areas of SAD, however these surveys cannot detect all

infected stands (Maps 1, 2 and 3). Ground surveys are done in potential treatment areas to determine the actual extent of declining stands and need to treat each stand.

In addition to commercial and non-commercial removal methods, woody biomass markets may be pursued as a option thereby allowing treatments in areas which were once considered not feasible. The Forest Service has a national policy that encourages biomass utilization for renewable energy, climate change and other purposes ([www.fs.fed.us/woodybiomass/index.shtml/index.shtml](http://www.fs.fed.us/woodybiomass/index.shtml/index.shtml)).

### **PROPOSED ACTION**

The Grand Valley Ranger District is proposing commercial and non-commercial treatments of spruce beetle-infested conifer and sudden aspen decline trees using timber sale contracts, stewardship contracts, permits, and other methods (i.e., prescribed burning, in-house crews etc.).

A majority of the acreage treated would involve sanitation and salvage operations associated with spruce beetle infestations and SAD. Due to the anticipated mortality levels, the Forest Service is proposing an extensive approach, including increased removal of dead and diseased trees.

As part of spruce beetle management, individual contracts and permits would be limited to areas which are actively infested with spruce beetles, or where beetle populations have killed standing trees. The treatments may include but may not be limited to commercial and non-commercial operations, prescribed fire, mastication operations, hand felling and other management techniques.

The treatment areas would **not** be located within the proposed Research Natural Area (*Colorado Natural Areas Program - Potential Research Areas 1996*); other areas administratively withdrawn from harvest activity; inventoried roadless areas (see Maps 1-3); and areas with slopes of more than 40%.

### **Treatment methods**

There are several treatment methods that would be utilized to address the spruce beetle infestation and sudden aspen decline.

Within spruce/fir stands affected by the spruce beetle, sanitation and salvage harvest methods would include individual tree selection (ITS) and group selection. Where infestations are lighter and where the residual stand would remain wind firm after attacked trees are removed, individual tree selection would be implemented (Figure 1).

Removal methods would be based on the best treatment method to address the spruce beetle within specific area. Spruce beetle typically attacks older trees which are less able to effectively defend themselves as a younger more vigorous tree. In many cases the older trees are the larger trees in the stand. Two or more age classes are typically encountered in these stands. As



Figure 1. A depiction of the Individual Tree Selection harvest method, where infested trees are removed from the stand.

a result, after ITS operations much of the advanced regeneration, small and medium sized trees (0-12" in diameter) would remain along with a varying amount of larger trees. This type of harvesting would likely occur on 70% of areas treated.

Where infestations are heavy, group selection harvesting may be employed (Figure 2.) Group selection openings would not exceed 2 acres in size, however along the length of the opening; the width would generally not exceed two tree lengths (based on the tallest trees in the vicinity).

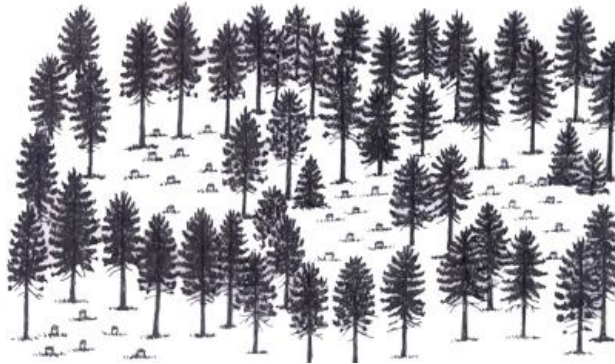


Figure 2. A depiction of the Group Selection harvest method, where groups of infested and non-wind firm trees are removed from the forest.

Within group selection harvesting areas, most trees would be harvested due to the heavy nature of attacks, to encourage natural regeneration creating new age cohorts. Some trees less than eight inches may be left if viable and would not curtail desirable regeneration. Scarification or exposing areas of mineral soil over approximately 50% of the group area would occur to promote natural regeneration. Also, some high profile slash and debris would be left over approximately 60% of the group to provide “dead shade” to promote natural regeneration of tree seedlings, and to provide important habitat for the snowshoe hare. It has been well demonstrated that this combination of scarification and slash left in place does effectively promote regeneration.

Short sections of constructed temporary roads that would not exceed a mile per timber sale may be authorized. Some closed roads may be reopened temporarily. Temporary roads will not be built in any inventoried roadless area. New temporary roads and reopened roads will be closed and/or obliterated after use by the purchaser. Closure and travel management methods may include gates, closure orders, water bars, out sloping, removing culverts, ripping, seeding, placing rock or woody debris in roadways, or restoring to contour.

Treatments within aspen would occur only in stands currently affected by SAD. Clearcuts in aspen stands are necessary for regeneration (Figure 3). Stands with moderate to high severity of SAD will be the highest priority to treat. Not all stands affected by SAD may be treated.

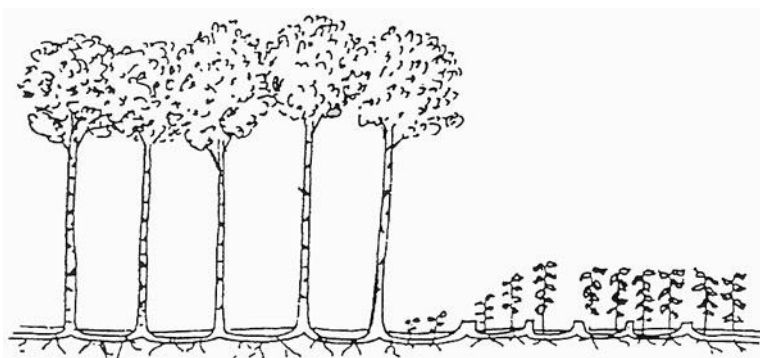


Figure 3. Clearcutting in SAD infected aspen promotes regeneration of this species.

Other treatments would include prescribe burning, mastication and hand felling of trees (Figures 4 and 5). Treatment methods would be determined based on individual site conditions.





Figures 4 and 5. Examples of prescribed burning and mastication on the GMUG.

Treatment areas would avoid all wetlands and employ Best Management Practices (BMP's) to protect water quality. Site conditions will be examined to identify specific design criteria prior to implementation.

This proposed action is consistent with and tiers to the Forest Plan (1991, as amended). Refer to Maps 1, 2, and 3 for those areas currently identified to have spruce beetle or sudden aspen decline.

### **DECISIONS TO BE MADE**

The following decisions are to be made through this analysis:

- 1) Should the Grand Valley Ranger District assertively implement treatments to address the spruce beetle outbreak? If so, what parameters would be required for each treatment area?
- 2) Should the GVRD implement treatments to address sudden aspen decline? If so, what parameters would be required for each treatment area?

### **ISSUES AND THE SCOPING PROCESS**

#### **The Scoping Process**

The scoping process is running concurrently with the opportunity to comment required by 36 CFR 215.3. The purpose of scoping and the 30 day comment period is not only to identify a list of issues and concerns regarding the proposed action, but to identify key issues to be analyzed in depth.

#### **Preliminary Issues**

The Forest Service has identified one preliminary issue:

#### **Threatened & Endangered Species / Sensitive Species**

Timber harvest activities and road development may affect certain federally listed or Forest Service Sensitive species on the Grand Mesa, such as Canada lynx (federally threatened) and purple martin (FS sensitive species).

The Endangered Species Act (ESA) and Forest Service policy require the assessment of potential effects of proposed agency actions on species that are listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA, or as Sensitive by the Regional Forester (FSM 2670). The species that are present or that have potentially suitable habitats in and adjacent to the analysis area will be analyzed in-depth in Chapter 3 of the revised EA, in a Biological Assessment (BA) prepared to meet the requirements of section 7 of the ESA for federally-listed species, and a Biological Evaluation (BE) to meet Forest Service policy for Sensitive species.

Additional issues will be considered following an analysis of public comments.

### **PROJECT DESIGN FEATURES**

The application of standard project design features that are commonplace to these types of activities will be an integral part of all action alternatives developed. Standard direction found in Forest Service handbooks, Forest Plan standard and guidelines and standard timber sale contract provisions would

also be incorporated into all action alternatives. All design features would be considered based upon public comments and further analysis of the proposed activities. For a list of commonly used design features, please contact the district office.

### **Submitting Comments**

The comment period will end 30 days from the publication date of a legal notice in the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel. The purpose of this comment period is to provide an opportunity for the public to provide early and meaningful participation on a proposed action prior to a decision being made by the Responsible Official. Those who provide substantive comments during the comment period provided at 40 CFR 1503.1 are eligible to appeal the decision pursuant to 36 CFR part 215 regulations.

Written, facsimile, hand-delivered, oral and electronic comments concerning this action will be accepted. Comments can be received at the following places:

<b>Written Comments via the U.S. Postal Service or hand delivered:</b> Connie Clementson, Grand Valley District Ranger 2777 Crossroads Blvd Unit 1 Grand Junction, CO 81506 Attention: Grand Valley SB and SAD Treatments
<b>Written Comments via e-mail:</b> To: <a href="mailto:comments-rocky-mountain-gmug-grande-valley@fs.fed.us">comments-rocky-mountain-gmug-grande-valley@fs.fed.us</a> Subject: Spruce Beetle and SAD Treatments
<b>Written Comments via facsimile:</b> (970) 263-5819 Attention: Spruce Beetle and SAD Treatments
<b>Oral Comments via telephone or in person during business hours (8am – 5pm, Monday through Friday, excluding federal holidays):</b> Connie Clementson, Grand Valley District Ranger 2777 Crossroads Blvd Unit 1 Grand Junction, Colorado 81506 (970) 242-8211

Oral comments must be provided at the Responsible Official's office during normal business hours via telephone or in person, or at an official agency function (i.e. public meetings) that is designed to elicit public comments. Electronic comments must be submitted in a format such as an e-mail message, plain text (.txt), rich text format (.rtf), or Word (.doc). In cases where no identifiable name is attached to a comment, a verification of identity will be required for appeal eligibility. If using an electronic message, a scanned signature is one way to provide verification.

It is the responsibility of persons providing comments to submit them by the close of the comment period. Only those who submit timely and substantive comments will have eligibility to appeal the subsequent decision under 36 CFR 215. Individuals and organizations wishing to be eligible to appeal must meet the information requirements of 36 CFR 215.6.

For further information please contact Kevin Kyle at (970) 263-5829 or [khkyle@fs.fed.us](mailto:khkyle@fs.fed.us).